

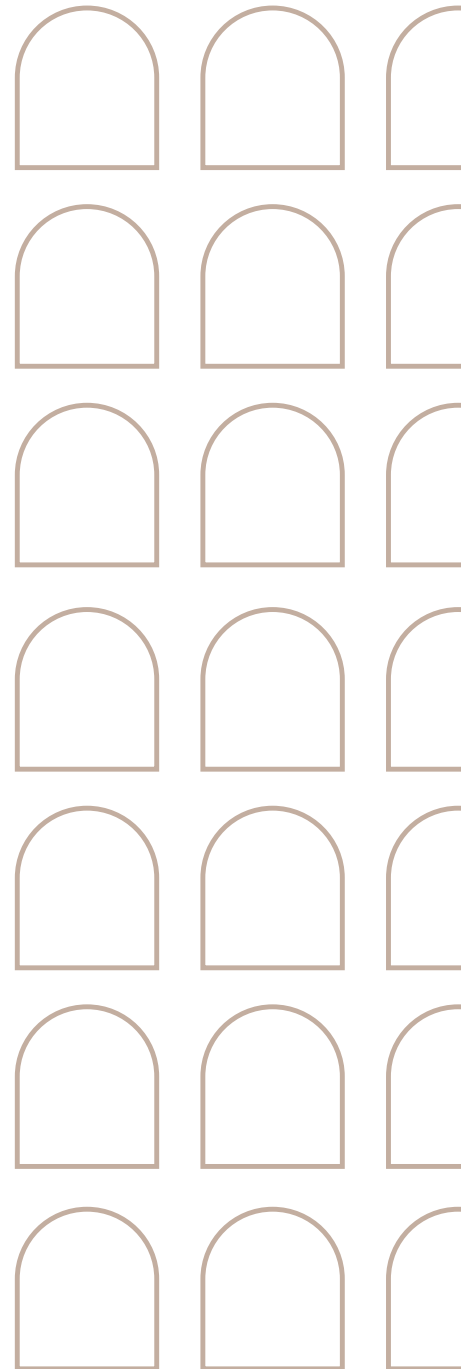
STG Policy Papers

# POLICY BRIEF

## DANCING IN THE GULF: MARITIME SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE GULF OF GUINEA AS A PATHWAY TO STRENGTHENING AFRICA-EU RELATIONS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

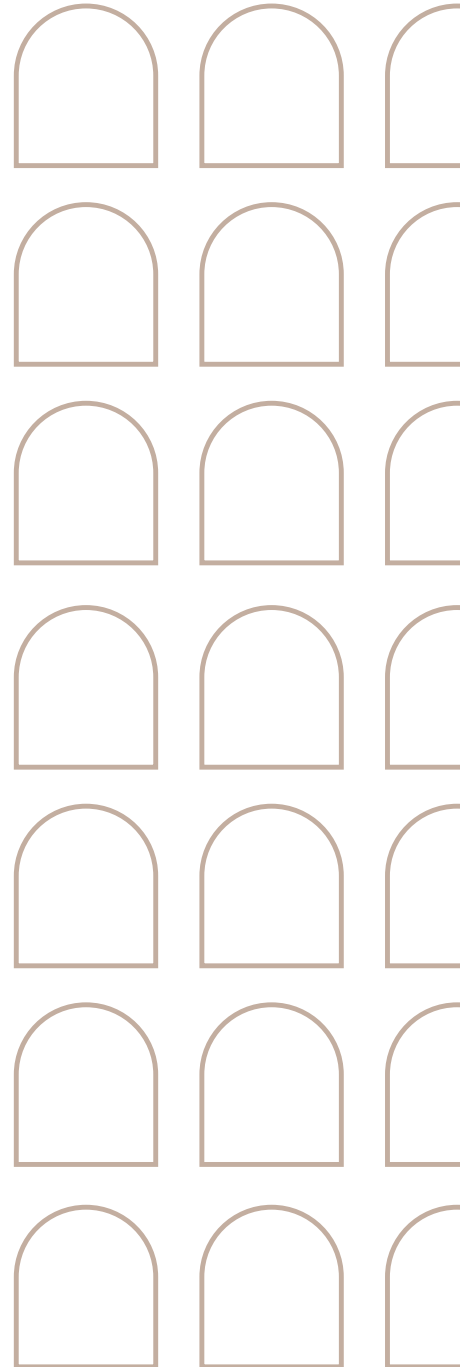
The EU has long played the role of a critical maritime security provider in the Gulf. Its efforts, however, have been perceived to have dual effects: they are mutually beneficial and also – more controversially – seen as infringements of regional sovereignty.<sup>1</sup> This dualism is further aggravated by the region’s volatility as a centre of great-power competition. Africa and the EU can either leverage their long-standing partnership to galvanise efforts in the shared agenda of enhancing maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea or face heightened geopolitical tension characterised by sovereignty versus great-power competition in the region. Given the fluidity and synergy of the ocean space, the former provides a unique opportunity to shape the context of Africa-EU relations far beyond the confines of the Gulf of Guinea in a manner that will be mutually beneficial to both parties.

<sup>1</sup> Regional sovereignty here is based on the notion of national sovereignty – that states in the Gulf of Guinea region have the sole authority to make decisions concerning their territories (Thompson, 1995).

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# 1. BACKGROUND

Extending from Senegal in the north to Angola in the south, the Gulf of Guinea is of immense geo-strategic importance for Africa. In fact, West and Central African coastal and landlocked countries linked to the Gulf of Guinea<sup>2</sup> constitute over 46% of African states. By 2050, Gulf of Guinea states are anticipated to contain a quarter of the global population. Therefore, the region is a viable starting point for strengthening or marring ties with the entire African continent.

In the European Union (EU), intricate ties with the Gulf are particularly harder to ignore. The EU imports as much as 13% of its oil consumption from the Gulf of Guinea. In addition, about 40% of its oil imports have to pass through the region each year. These statistics demonstrate clear co-dependencies between maritime security in the Gulf and economic stability in the EU.

Unfortunately, the Gulf's extensive resource wealth and global significance are paralleled by a vast array of maritime insecurities. These insecurities are characterised by complexity, in terms of both discrete and interlinked manifestations. Previously described as the most dangerous region for seafarers in the world, the Gulf of Guinea has been plagued by maritime criminality ranging from piracy and armed robbery at sea to illegal unreported unregulated (IUU) fishing, each of which have parlous, cross-continental implications. The result has been a massive proliferation of interventions aimed at addressing the Gulf's maritime insecurity by a broad range of regional and international actors and stakeholders.

Much like the Indian Ocean, interventionism in the Gulf of Guinea has been characterised by heightened geopolitical tensions, with great and emerging powers pressing not only for dominance but also for strategic positions as preferred partners of Gulf of Guinea states. Perhaps most prominent among them is the EU, which has long played an immutable role as a critical maritime security provider in the

region.

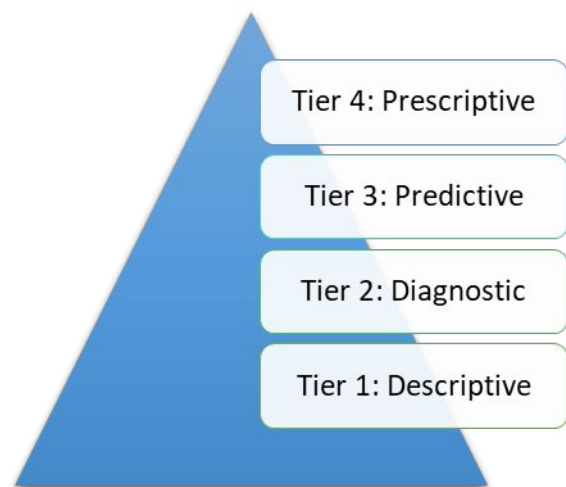
Given the immense significance of the Gulf of Guinea for both Africa and the EU, both blocs are faced with antithetical outcomes regarding EU interventionism in the region: they can either leverage their long-standing partnership in the Gulf to galvanise efforts in the shared agenda of `maritime security or face heightened geopolitical tensions characterised by diplomatic failures.

**“...interventionism in the Gulf of Guinea has been characterised by heightened geopolitical tensions, with great and emerging powers pressing not only for dominance but also for strategic positions as preferred partners of Gulf of Guinea states.”**

# 2. COMPLEX PROBLEMS, COMPLEX SOLUTIONS

Exploring how interventionism in the Gulf could ultimately work to strengthen Africa-EU relations is a task that is as delicate as it is necessary. For this reason, this paper adopts a four-tiered analytical approach (see Figure 1 below) based on data science theory to build a holistic understanding of maritime insecurities and maritime geopolitics in the region and how they have collectively shaped Africa-EU relations over time.

Figure 1



Source: Author (2023)

<sup>2</sup> These states include: Senegal, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, São Tomé and Príncipe and Cabo Verde, which directly border the Gulf; and Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Central African Republic, Rwanda and Burundi, which are linked to the Gulf of Guinea through coastal states.

## 2.1 Tier 1: Descriptive

### 2.1.1 A Closer Look at Maritime Insecurity in the Gulf

Between 2005 and 2012, piracy in the Gulf of Aden off the coast of Somalia dominated global maritime security discourse, with sporadic brazen attacks along shipping routes off Somalia's coast [growing in volume and intensity](#). As the waters in the Gulf of Aden grew calmer in 2013, a new piracy hotspot emerged, drawing international attention away from one Gulf to another.

With both regions lying off Africa's coasts, maritime security discourse on the Gulf of Guinea region often drew on [lessons from Somalia](#). However, the instances could not be more different. First, piracy in the Gulf of Aden usually occurred beyond the territorial sea of Somalia (a single state battling insecurity), which explicitly requested for support from the international community, creating greater room for interventionism. In contrast, attacks in the Gulf of Guinea generally occur along the coasts of multiple states.

Second, while maritime concerns in the Gulf of Aden were [dominated by piracy](#), the Gulf of Guinea has been plagued by a multiplicity of threats. One of the most notable reflections of this was the adoption of the [Yaoundé Code of Conduct \(YCOC\)](#) in 2013 to provide a comprehensive framework for addressing the region's maritime insecurities. The Code identified twelve different forms of transnational organised crime prevalent in the region, including crude oil theft, illicit trafficking and maritime pollution. The YCOC was preceded by adoption in 2012 of [the 2050 African Integrated Maritime Strategy \(AIMS\)](#) – an African Union (AU)-led strategy document that provided the first overarching framework for addressing illicit activities in Africa's maritime domain.

In 2016 and 2017, the economic cost of crude oil theft in Nigeria alone was [more than US\\$10 billion](#) – an amount exceeding Nigeria's budgeted allocations for both health and education in 2018. Even more devastating are the financial implications of IUU fishing, which

is so pervasive in West Africa – [the global epicentre of the threat](#) – that it constitutes as much as [40-65% of the legally reported catch](#) in the region. Annually, West Africa loses [about US\\$1.3 billion](#) to IUU fishing activities.

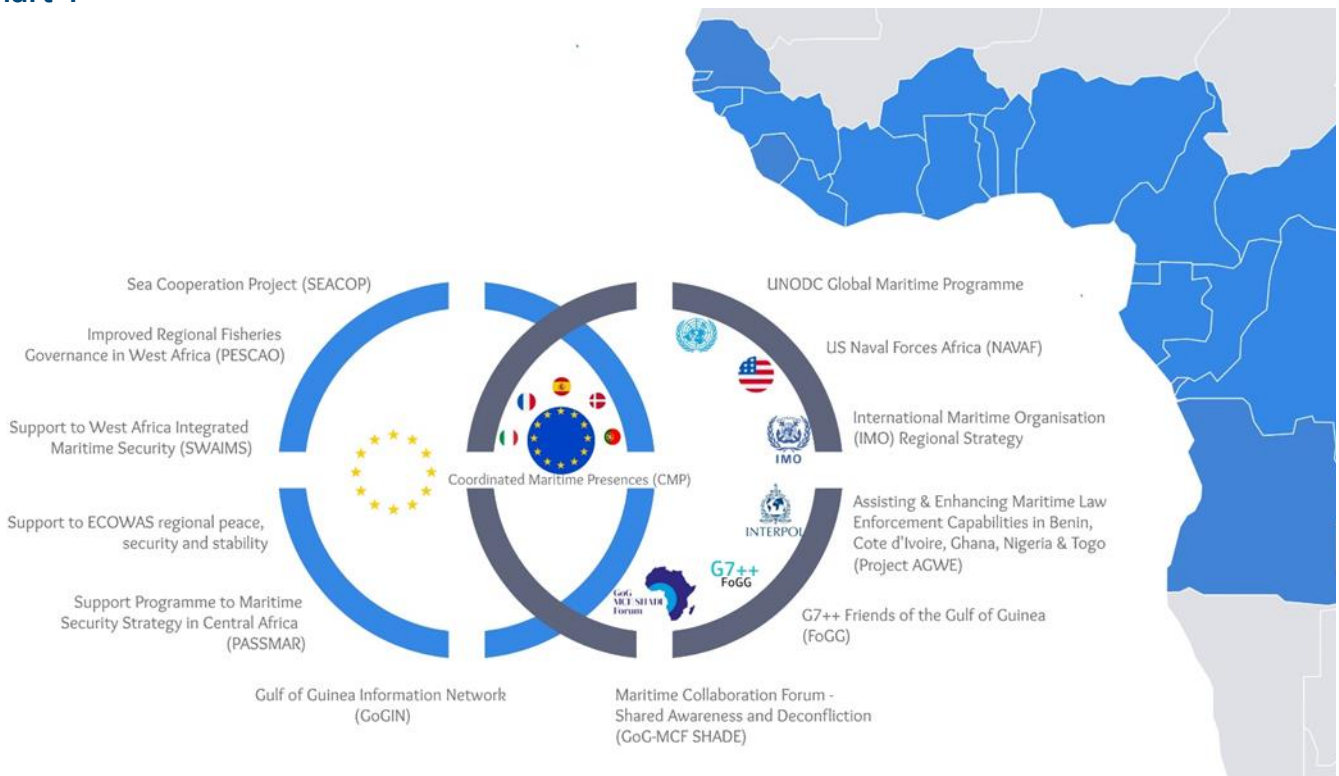
Human trafficking has been described as one of the [worst criminal activities in the region](#). Evidence has shown that women and girls are transported for the purpose of prostitution from source and transit countries like Nigeria and Ghana in a well organised trade that takes full advantage of limited maritime domain awareness (MDA) capabilities in the Gulf of Guinea. In Italy, [at least 10,000 illegally trafficked Nigerians](#) are engaged in prostitution as victims of exploitative debt bondages.

### 2.1.2 International Solutions to a Regional Problem

Given the Gulf of Guinea's significance, the security concerns of the region are also concerns for the international community. The international focus on the region has largely been driven by increasing incidents of piracy and armed robbery at sea in the Gulf. The result was adoption of UN Security Council Resolutions [2018](#) (in 2011) and [2039](#) (in 2012). Both resolutions laid foundations for maritime security cooperation in the region, charting a path to garner international momentum to bolster international trade and security in the Gulf and beyond.

Following these resolutions, the Gulf of Guinea witnessed a significant proliferation of maritime security initiatives and interventions championed by external partners, several of which function within the framework created by the YCOC. The chart below (page 5) shows some of the major regional actions by the EU and multi-donor initiatives in the Gulf of Guinea. Beyond these, other great and emerging global powers like Russia, China, Japan, South Korea, India and Brazil have naval forces present in the region and are often actively engaged in routine operational exercises.

## Chart 1



Source: Author (2023)

## 2.2 Tier 2: Diagnostic

### 2.2.1 Maritime Geopolitics in the Gulf: An Age-old Affair

In several respects, international interest in the Gulf of Guinea is not a recent phenomenon. The Gulf has a dense geopolitical history with European states anchored in its evolution as a commercial shipping route. In the 15th century, Portugal released a declaration commonly referred to as the [Papal Bull of 1493](#), which among other things sought to divide the world's oceans between Portugal and Spain. In the late 16th century, the Dutch, who were commercial rivals of the Portuguese, began to establish trading posts in the Gulf of Guinea, which heightened the tension between the two states.

By 1890, the strategic significance of the Gulf of Guinea for Europe had culminated in colonisation of the entire region. [The sea played a significant role in this](#) as all the colonial powers were coastal states that relied on the ocean as the primary connector between Africa and Europe. Now, centuries later, the EU is not unmatched in asserting its interests

in the region. By the early 2000s, oil in the Gulf of Guinea was described as [America's New Frontier](#) and in 2004 the US held a series of congressional hearings on the [Gulf of Guinea and US Strategic Energy Policy](#). A few years later, the Gulf of Guinea was declared by the US to be [an area of strategic national interest](#)

“...the ocean has long been a key definer of diplomatic relations and conflicts among states...”

that would require military intervention to protect.

China's interest in offshore energy and fisheries in the Gulf of Guinea can also not be underestimated. In 2001 and 2002 Chinese oil companies “[aggressively branched out across Africa](#),” with the Gulf of Guinea being one of the primary focal points. China also considers the region's offshore resource wealth to be imperative to its interests, given the Gulf's strategic positioning as a vital source of crude oil. In 2013, the country launched its New Silk Road initiative, which was intended to

[expand its export markets, with the effect of strengthening its geopolitical power](#) in Africa. Beyond this initiative, China has occasionally offered millions of dollars in oil-backed credit to Gulf of Guinea states, offering [US\\$2 billion worth of such financing](#) to Angola in 2003-2004.

As in the case of the Indian Ocean, the presence of various foreign military bases and naval assets in the Gulf of Guinea significantly [increases chances of friction](#) between these states. An unintended consequence may be a solidification and deepening of alliances between Gulf of Guinea states and foreign partners playing active roles in the region.

The resulting mosaic of interests in the region also increases the possibility of [duplicated or disjointed efforts](#) by international partners that provide material or systemic support to the region.

Left unchecked, these corollaries could have dire consequence for effective maritime regulation and enforcement in the Gulf. Given the proximity of EU states to Africa, the resulting proliferation of insecurities would be disproportionately inimical to the interests of the EU, not only because of the bloc's extensive investments worth [millions of euros](#) in maritime security in the Gulf, but also because of the possibility of transnational criminal networks extending from the Gulf of Guinea to the Mediterranean Sea.

The EU therefore has a far greater impetus to position itself as the Gulf's major partner in matters concerning maritime security. Of course, this would not only safeguard various facets of EU security (including economic and energy security) but would also provide one of the most bona fide pathways for boosting Africa-EU relations. Indeed, the ocean has long been a [key definer of diplomatic relations and conflicts](#) among states, with the [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea \(UNCLOS\)](#) considered [the most significant international legal instrument of the 20th century](#).

### 2.2.2 A Focus on the CMP

For the EU, this implies skilfully navigating diplomatic relations with Gulf of Guinea states in the areas of ocean governance and maritime security. The Coordinated Maritime Presences (CMP) concept of the EU provides some major lessons in this regard. The CMP was [presented](#) in 2019 as a tool that would facilitate increasing the capacity of the EU as a reliable maritime security provider in line with its global strategic objectives. The concept allows coordination of existing air and naval assets in the EU's maritime areas of interest. On 25 January 2021, the CMP received [political endorsement](#) at the EU Council level and was piloted in the Gulf of Guinea.

Despite the immense potential of the CMP to strengthen maritime diplomatic relations between the EU and Gulf of Guinea states, it served as one of the [most contentious areas of discussion](#) between the two parties at the region's largest multilateral maritime security forum, the G7++ Friends of the Gulf of Guinea (FoGG) plenary held on 1 and 2 December 2022 in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire. On the one hand, notable regional actors (including some regional navies) felt that Gulf of Guinea states had not been adequately consulted before the concept was rolled out. On the other hand, European delegations maintained that adequate coordination with national and regional authorities had taken place in the development of the CMP.

These disputes were amplified by an [earlier incident](#) on 25 November 2021, in which a Danish frigate operating under the CMP killed four suspected pirates in the Gulf of Guinea. Regional actors felt that the incident reflected poorly on their sovereignty.<sup>3</sup> While the sovereignty of Gulf of Guinea states may not have been breached under international law, there were clear indications of a failure under the CMP in terms of maritime relations and diplomacy.

### 2.3 Tier 3: Predictive

<sup>3</sup> The stakeholder perceptions of the CMP reported here and in the preceding paragraphs were clearly articulated during dialogues at the G7++FoGG plenary held in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire, which the author attended and contributed to.

### 2.3.1 Evolving Security Dynamics, Evolving Relations

Over the past two years, incidents of piracy and armed robbery at sea in the Gulf of Guinea have [reduced considerably](#). The drop in piracy activities is welcome but it has led to debates about whether the relative stability in the region [can be sustained in the long run](#). More controversially, it has also heightened concerns that pirate groups in the region may have merely shifted to [other maritime criminal activities](#) which, unlike piracy, are [seldom the focus of maritime interventionism in the region](#).<sup>4</sup>

These evolving security dynamics could lead to a shift in the priorities of the region's international partners. The US, for instance, indicated during the G7++ FoGG plenary in 2022 that there was a need to broaden notions of maritime security to cover more critical issues, including marine environmental protection and the ocean-climate nexus. Similarly, IUU fishing is gradually being recognised as West Africa's [foremost maritime security threat](#), with demonstrable linkages to piracy and other forms of transnational organised crime.

The much-needed expansion of perceptions of maritime threats in the region may require a restructuring of the priorities of the EU in the Gulf, but it also creates opportunities for more extensive and cross-cutting diplomatic relations between the EU and Gulf of Guinea states. The EU will therefore have to exhibit high elasticity in responding to the shifting undercurrents in the Gulf's maritime threat path.

### 2.4 Tier 4: Prescriptive

In light of the expatiations above, it is recommended that the EU align its maritime security priorities with the prevalent needs of the Gulf of Guinea in particular and the African continent at large. Such reprioritisation may be resource-intensive, but recognition of Africa as a key legitimate partner in [propelling the EU to strategic autonomy](#) makes it well worth the effort. Taking into account regional perceptions during the reprioritisation of the Union is absolutely crucial, especially since some

regional actors are convinced that Western priorities in the Gulf are motivated solely by self-interest and not by a genuine desire for mutually beneficial outcomes.

Second, the EU must take tangible steps to integrate the inputs of Gulf of Guinea actors in developing its overarching strategy for the region. Western powers like the US and the EU have long been guided in their relations with African states by strategic documents such as the [US Strategy Toward Sub-Saharan Africa](#) and the [EU Strategy on the Gulf of Guinea](#). These strategic documents are sometimes perceived by regional actors to be condescending because they often include statements or phrases identifying regional maritime security priorities without actively engaging with voices from the Gulf. It is therefore necessary to engage with Gulf of Guinea states in extensive dialogue that can feed into such strategy development processes. This will ensure that regional security priorities are duly recognised in mapping out shared security concerns for the Gulf of Guinea.

**“ ... It is as important for the EU to communicate why it needs Gulf of Guinea states as it is for the Union to convey how it can contribute to effective maritime security provision in the region. ”**

A third level of action for the EU is to be **transparent about its interests in the region and its motivation for investing heavily in maritime security interventionism in the Gulf**. When Gulf of Guinea states have a clear understanding of the EU's desired agenda there will be less concern about 'hidden agendas' and competing priorities. It is as important for the EU to communicate why it needs Gulf of Guinea states as it is for the Union to convey how it can contribute to effective maritime security provision in the region. At the moment the latter is far more dominant in diplomatic communications with Gulf states.

For African states, it is important to note that while EU interventionism in the region can have some unanticipated implications for regional

<sup>4</sup> See pages 150-152 of the hyperlinked text.

sovereignty, it has chalked up noteworthy successes in addressing maritime criminality in the Gulf of Guinea. Rather than view these successes with scepticism, African states must expand their understanding of the mutually beneficial outcomes resulting from them. To facilitate such an understanding, it would be prudent for Gulf of Guinea states to **establish their own strategic guidance documents to navigate relations between coastal states and crucial partners like the EU**. Naturally, these should be based on existing blueprints such as the 2050 AIMS. The essence would be to give states in the region a clear picture of their priorities, and of where these intersect meaningfully with the interests and priorities of the EU and other significant international partners.

As maritime security challenges in the Gulf of Guinea evolve, both Africa and the EU must brace themselves for a concomitant evolution of their relations. Recurrent dialogue between the partners is crucial to build a sense of agency in states bordering the Gulf and to foster trust in relations with the EU. At the same time, Gulf of Guinea states must have a comprehensive understanding of their own interests so that they are better positioned to negotiate outcomes that benefit them as much as they may benefit the EU. As Africa's most diverse maritime domain, the Gulf of Guinea provides one of the most viable areas for building strategic ties between Africa and the EU. It is time for the two parties to take advantage of the Gulf's geostrategic essence to foster a long-standing partnership that transcends the entire African continent.



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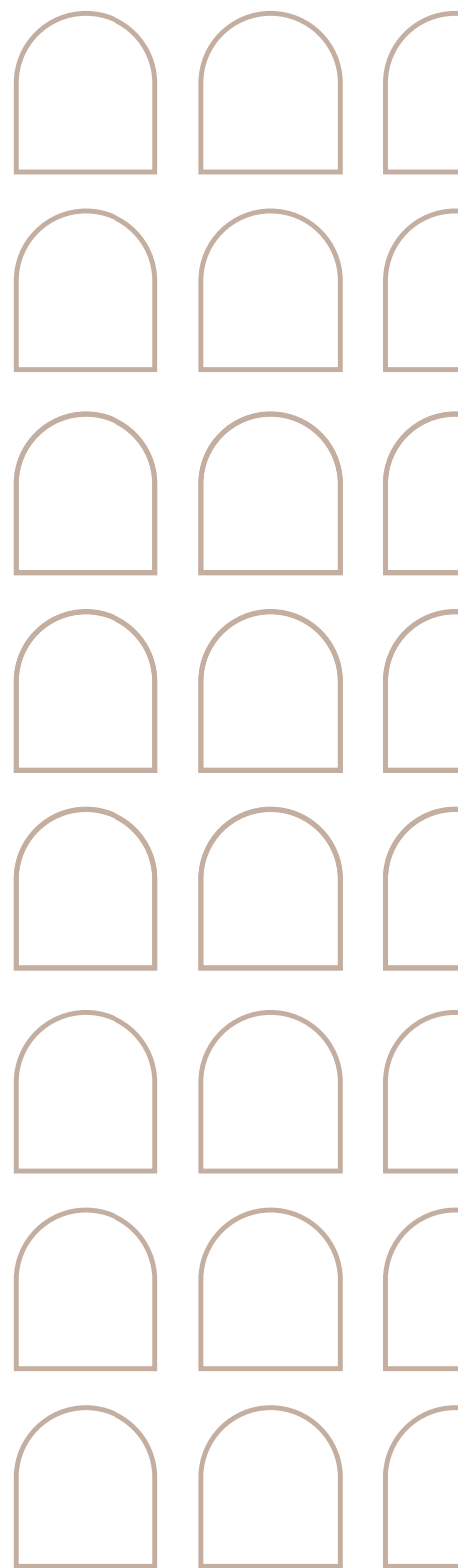
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